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Reshma Patil

Hindustan Times in Mumbai

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Patil, Reshma, "Letter from Little Lhasa" (2012). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 36.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/36>

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Letter from Little Lhasa

March 20, 2012 in [China Around the World](#) by [The China Beat](#)

How the world's largest newspaper market reads Tibet

By Reshma Patil

The runaway from a Tibetan village in Naba, China, led the way down the slippery dirt track to the doorstep of a restaurant with a Potala Palace bereft of tourists and soldiers painted on its blue walls.

The Tibetan-speaking attendant at Chonor House politely declined to serve my first meal in McLeod Ganj. The kitchens were functioning only for hotel guests until the end of Losar. The three-day Tibetan New Year passed uncelebrated earlier this month in the Indian hill-town teeming with Tibetan exiles who give Dharamshala the moniker of Little Lhasa. The exiled Tibetan government is edged higher in the cliff-side of Dharamshala in the former British cantonment of McLeod Ganj.

The symbolic protest, staged through a silent Losar without homemade feasts and multi-coloured prayer flags strung on storefronts, went unnoticed in the national press. Dharamshala is connected to New Delhi by a daily flight from a stunningly secluded runway near the foothills of the snow-capped Dhauladhar range. The airport has more exiled monks and foreigners lugging backpacks than Indian tourists. There is nothing to do if the day's lone takeoff is delayed; no coffee machine, no magazine rack, just an endless meditative wait.

The exiled Tibetans are waiting for the world to intervene as protests simmer in remote Buddhist monastery towns in China. The bazaar walls in Dharamshala are plastered with bilingual posters for an 'independent' Tibet. The posters include grainy pictures of self-immolators, over 20 since last March, some of whom reportedly died shouting slogans for 'freedom' and 'the return of the Dalai Lama'.

Inspired by pamphlets on the Dalai Lama that were scattered in his nomadic village, Tsezin boarded a bus out of his homeland in 2001 and trekked through mountain passes for 28 days to reach Nepal through the Tibetan capital, Lhasa. He was 17 years old when he made it to Dharamshala for Tibetan-style schooling.

We were passing by hawkers of Tibetan handicrafts made in Nepal when he greeted a monk. "He's the uncle of a nun who self-immolated in China," he pointed out. Such references are now the stuff of street talk in this temple town where a modern building houses the Kirti Monastery, a smaller centre of the restive Kirti Monastery in Sichuan that China has sealed from the outside world.

In 2008, Tsezin briefly experienced the inside of an Indian jail for participating in an anti-China gathering during the Beijing Olympics torch relay. "The security and roadblocks kept us so far away that I could not see the relay," he recalls.

That was the last time the protests of angry Tibetans leaping over barricades outside the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi hit national headlines for several days.

Tibet in the story so far

The newsrooms of India and China—the world’s [two largest newspaper markets](#), with daily sales of 110 million copies in India and 109 million copies in China in 2010—peg news on either other side of the disputed border based on geopolitical national interest.

India is home to over 100,000 exiled Tibetans. But the self-immolations by monks, nuns and nomads receive low-key coverage in the national English newspapers, averaging a story a week.

Tibet gets more column space in breaking news on the statecraft between Beijing and New Delhi. New trends driving the coverage of Tibet in the Indian press developed since the end of the last decade:

- **‘Southern Tibet’ and the boundary:** Chinese scholars privately admit, but do not dare openly express, scepticism about ever acquiring this 90,000 sq km sprawl of mountainous turf that in just sheer size is thrice as strategic as Taiwan for China. Indian scholars note that the state-run Chinese media since 2005 began to tactically reassert Beijing’s claim on Arunachal Pradesh, with more frequent references naming the northeast Indian state as ‘Southern Tibet’. Beijing denies visas to its residents to assert its ownership and gobbles the state in its own digital and printed maps. (See: [China gets map wrong, envoy yells ‘shut up’](#))

A half-century since Asia’s largest nations went to war in 1962, their border dispute remains unresolved. The Indian media is attentive to every move on Arunachal Pradesh, which India claims as an integral part of its territory. In 2009, the Chinese foreign ministry’s objections to the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the Dalai Lama’s visit to the state sparked a bilateral crisis. In February, [Beijing objected to Indian defence minister A K Antony’s visit to the state](#), which shares a 1080-km long boundary with China.

“Tibet-related issues have for long poisoned the bilateral negotiations on the boundary dispute,” [wrote strategist C Raja Mohan](#) in *The Indian Express* in January. And that is the main story for years to come.

- **Core concerns:** The political potential of India wielding the Tibet card and China the Kashmir card keep the neighbours wary of each other.

In the last three years, Tibet loomed larger as the great upset in bilateral relations. India from 2008 to 2011 argued against China shifting a former ‘neutral’ policy on the northern state of Jammu and Kashmir. Several Indian citizens from the state, including a northern army commander, [began to receive stapled instead of stamped visas](#) to travel to China. The Chinese media largely blacked out the dispute, though it sparked the suspension of military ties for a year. The Indian media incessantly followed up the story, despite the Chinese foreign ministry’s requests to the Beijing-based media to downplay what it labeled as a ‘technical’ disagreement.

Beijing badly misjudged the impact of this stapled visa policy on public opinion in India. New Delhi's demand for 'mutual sensitivity' concerning Jammu and Kashmir (where China occupies 38,000 sq km) in return for recognising Chinese 'core concerns' or sovereignty in Tibet and Taiwan received [clamorous and approving coverage in India](#). For the first time, a Sino-Indian joint statement, issued after Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to New Delhi in late 2010, failed to mention India's 'one-China policy' or Tibet, though there was no change in stance. Beijing temporarily stopped issuing stapled visas in 2011.

- **The Dalai Lama in the middle:** China's growing moves to suppress the international influence of the Dalai Lama, within India, directly impact ties with New Delhi. So [recent statements issued in the Party wire](#), Xinhua, blaming the exiled government for 'separatism' were better displayed on Indian news pages than the latest self-immolation coinciding with the anniversary of the Dalai Lama's escape to India in 1959.

Tibet hit national front pages and editorials late last year after [Beijing postponed boundary negotiations](#) on the 3,488-km long dispute (2,000-km according to China). Special Representative Dai Bingguo reportedly refused to be in the Indian capital on the same day as the Dalai Lama, who would address a massive Buddhist gathering.

"Beijing has dropped quiet diplomacy in favour of tough-worded demands," said the *Hindustan Times* in a December 2011 piece titled ["Why the Dalai Lama makes China see red"](#).

"China has upped the ante on the Dalai Lama because it recognises that he remains a major strategic asset for India," [wrote strategist Brahma Chellaney](#) in the *Times of India*.

Dai Bingguo [wrote a friendly piece](#) in *The Hindu* to give Beijing better press. The article had a curious line. "There does not exist such a thing as China's attempt to attack India".

- **Strategy:** China's build-up of 58,000-km of roads, the world's highest airbases and railroads on the roof of the world in Tibet has captivated Indian strategists, Parliamentarians and newspaper readers. Every new listening post nearer to the border gets reported with a pointer to India lagging behind China. [The railway minister's budget speech in March](#) included a call for modern border railroads to upgrade capability to move 'men and machines'.

- **Tibetan protests:** Dharamshala, though an obvious spot to follow-up the Tibetan protests in China, is in the spotlight of the international media more than the Indian press. For example, see the [Guardian](#) and the [Wall Street Journal](#), as well as this at the [Economist](#).

Last month, the Chinese and Indian foreign minister met in New Delhi and agreed to launch the first-ever maritime dialogue. A group of exiled Tibetans protested outside the venue. The protests for 'freedom' were temporarily noted, mostly on newspaper websites rather than in print. The frequently protesting Tibetan has become background to the great game between Beijing and New Delhi.

What happens next?

At every bilateral meeting, Beijing demands a reiteration of India's official policy that anti-China

activities on its soil are illegal. Conversations with Tibetan activists in Dharamshala indicate that they want to intensify their campaigns without alienating the hosts.

“I am really concerned that the peaceful Tibetan movement could turn violent if the Chinese crackdown continues,” Lobsang Keshi, a Kirti monk in Dharamshala, told the [Hindustan Times](#), in a story trailing recently arrived refugees from remote outposts like Naba and Amdo that are making news for demanding the return of the Dalai Lama.

A few days after the story was published, this writer rang the press officer in the Chinese embassy in New Delhi. The official initiated a dialogue to object on the above report, which included an interview with Lobsang Sangay, the Tibetan prime minister-in-exile. The diplomat interpreted the coverage as ‘shaking hand’ with Sangay. This is not how you ‘do business’ with the Chinese. The message: If you interview exiled Tibetans, we won’t talk to you. The writer had called for a news update on Sino-Indian business ties, the most promising aspect of bilateral relations between the fastest emerging economies.

The warning was not so unusual. [President Hu Jintao will travel to New Delhi](#) for the BRICS summit later this month.

Reshma Patil is associate editor at the Hindustan Times in Mumbai. She was the paper’s first China correspondent from 2008-11 and is writing her first book on Sino-Indian relations.

The views expressed in this article are the author’s own.